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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 002523

SIPDIS

PACOM FOR ADMIRAL KEATING FROM AMBASSADOR KENNEY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/06/2018

TAGS: MARR MOPS PINS PREL PTER RP

SUBJECT: YOUR DISCUSSIONS WITH GENERAL YANO AT CHOD
CONFERENCE

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Admiral Keating, in advance of your meeting with Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief of staff General Alexander Yano at the Chiefs of Defense conference, I wanted to give you a quick update on the situation in the Philippines and some key areas where I believe the strong relationship you have developed with General Yano could help us in our efforts to move forward important initiatives. I know that General Yano deeply values the bonds of trust and mutual respect you have developed over the past months, and I believe that your views on critical issues like the fighting in Mindanao, the stalled peace process and our bilateral security ties can help continue to move General Yano in a good direction.

NEW PRESIDENT, SUSTAINED SUPPORT

¶2. (C) I am certain you will find General Yano (and presumably his fellow chiefs) extremely interested in how the election of Barack Obama will affect U.S. security policy in the region and globally. In my discussions with an array of Philippine officials, including President Arroyo, whom I met yesterday just hours after President-elect Obama's win, I have emphasized that while every President has the right -- and obligation -- to shape our national strategy in line with his political mandate, the strength and enduring nature of U.S.-Philippine security, economic and personal ties strongly militate against a dramatic shift in our focus of helping the Philippine people create a more stable, secure and prosperous democracy. General Yano will benefit from your broad perspective on how the changing conditions in other key areas, particularly Iraq and Afghanistan, could impact our global commitments, including in Mindanao. I have been struck by the extraordinary interest and enthusiasm engendered by our election process among Filipinos of every political stripe, and I have stressed the importance of a peaceful, cooperative transition from President to President, which is not the norm in the Philippines.

CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO PEACE

¶3. (C) I took the opportunity in my meeting with President Arroyo to underscore our belief that a reinvigorated peace process is the only viable long-term solution to the Muslim insurgency in Mindanao. She reaffirmed to me her clear determination to revive the stalled peace talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and from my discussions with her top peace advisor, your former counterpart Jun Esperon, I am convinced the President is indeed committed to seeking peace, and moving carefully to build a grassroots consensus for renewed dialogue with the insurgents.

END THE FIGHTING, REBUILD SHATTERED LIVES

¶4. (S) At the same time, however, the President and her key security advisors -- including General Yano -- appear determined to continue their search for the rogue MILF commanders who carried out savage attacks in central Mindanao in early August, even though numerous Philippine military officials have acknowledged to us that the local MILF military capabilities have now been so degraded by AFP efforts that there is no strategic military benefit to continuing the operations. Meanwhile, tens of thousands of civilians are living in wretched conditions in displaced persons camps, and despite the efforts of USAID and international aid groups, sanitary and health conditions continue to deteriorate.

¶5. (S) I strongly believe that returning the displaced civilians to their villages, and having the Philippine military focus their efforts on civil-military operations to help rebuild shattered lives, will do more to reduce the conditions that breed insurgency than continuing a possibly futile search for three outlaws in heavy jungle. We also worry that military morale (and budgets) will begin to suffer if the hunt drags on until Christmas and beyond. I am certain that your views on the situation would carry additional weight with General Yano.

TARGETS OF OPPORTUNITY

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¶6. (S) On the counterterrorism front, we continue our vigorous efforts to provide the Philippine military with the information and capabilities that will allow them to effectively track down and interdict the most dangerous high-value terrorists still at large in the country, particularly Mindanao. General Yano has responded positively to our proposals to date, and I would encourage you to reinforce with him our determination and willingness to move quickly in providing assistance whenever good opportunities present themselves.

BROADER STRATEGY

¶7. (C) From our talks here, General Yano understands that we regularly reassess our overall approach in the southern Philippines, evaluating both our successes and how to tackle remaining challenges. While we often emphasize the role and mission of the JSOTF-P, and how it might transform as conditions change, I intend to begin focusing more on the importance of how we can build upon the clear successes of the current Philippine defense reform program, whose end coincides with that of the Arroyo administration in 2010. It would be useful to reinforce with General Yano the need to begin now to lay the groundwork for our next phase of military cooperation, which would further position the Philippines as a country capable not only of defending its own borders but contributing to regional security.

ARF EXERCISE

¶8. (C) In that same vein, I would appreciate any positive encouragement you could give General Yano on the upcoming ASEAN Regional Forum disaster relief exercise scheduled for next spring, as you so convincingly did during your last visit. The Philippine government is thoroughly engaged in preparing for the unprecedented ARF exercise, and General Yano will welcome your views on PACOM's contributions to the success of this U.S. co-hosted exercise.

KENNEY